The global pandemic has upended the status quo for orchestras and their audiences. Orchestras are improvising in real time as they adapt to ensure the safety of musicians, staff, and audiences with temporary shutdowns, postponements, shifts to digital music-making and chamber-scale concerts, and performances in the great outdoors. As COVID-19 evolved from its first iteration to the Delta and now the Omicron variants, new ways to keep the music playing while keeping everyone healthy—most recently, vaccine and mask requirements—are being tried and tested. Further, the national reckoning with racial injustice that emerged in the wake of the murder of George Floyd and too many others mean that the classical music field is now examining its own longstanding lack of forward movement on equity, diversity, and inclusion.

How are orchestras managing, experimenting, innovating? In the face of the ongoing pandemic, what do audiences expect of orchestras? What do orchestras expect of themselves? The League of American Orchestras is helping orchestras understand where they stand—and where they might head—with multiple surveys, studies, and research projects. Working with expert research partners, the League is asking orchestras and audiences, essentially, how and what they are doing, and then publishing the data after rigorous analysis. Recent studies

More than half of classical arts attenders in one survey say they hope that arts or culture organizations will change after the pandemic to become more relevant to more people.
from the League data partnerships with WolfBrown, TRG, and Slover Linett covering multiple topics are available at the League's COVID-19 Data Partnerships webpages. With these data partnerships, the League is taking orchestra data to the next level, supplementing its substantial orchestra data and research work and connecting members with insights on audience behavior to help navigate the pandemic and plan ahead.

On January 25, the League’s “Understanding Audience Motivations in a Time of Ongoing Uncertainty” webinar unpacks key findings from Culture + Community in a Time of Transformation—A Special Edition of Culture Track, a report by Slover Linett Audience Research and LaPlaca Cohen that analyzes a sample of more than 75,000 Americans and compares insights from the first 30 days of lockdown with audience perspectives more than a year into the pandemic. (The webinar was made possible by a grant from the Wallace Foundation.)

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kind of online arts or culture activity over the past year (compared to 64% of Americans overall). Live-stream performances (46%), pre-recorded performances (46%), and podcasts about arts/culture (38%) were the most common offerings used. While higher than Americans overall, just 29% of recent attenders had used online offerings provided by a classical music group (vs. 8% overall) over the past year. Among those doing arts or culture activities online, fewer than half of classical music attenders have paid for an online arts or culture activity over the past year (44% vs. 26% overall).

Need/Desire for Change
More than a third (36%) of classical attenders believe there is systemic racism in orchestras (compared to 28% of Americans overall). Notably, 74% of attenders believe arts or cultural organizations should address social issues in their communities (76% for Americans overall). And systemic racial injustice is the issue most believe arts or culture organizations should address (46% of attenders vs. 42% overall). Classical attenders are also more likely than the general public to want to see arts or culture organizations involving their communities and collaborating with them to create programs (67% vs. 61% overall).

More than half of classical attenders (54%) hope that arts or culture organizations will change after the pandemic to become more relevant to more people—on par with the national overall at 53%. And when the researchers proposed specific kinds of change, classical attenders expressed the most interest in affordable entry prices (63% vs. 53% overall), support for local artists (44% vs. 33% overall), and bringing new perspectives from outside their community (32% vs. 23% overall).

Helping Orchestras with Data Partnerships

The League of American Orchestras has partnered with WolfBrown’s Audience Outlook Monitor, which surveys and tracks audience attitudes about attending cultural events during and after the pandemic. Fifteen League-member orchestras participate in the study by asking their audiences multiple times about vaccination status, masking mandates, willingness to return to concert halls, concerns about COVID-19, and related issues. Read the full report at https://www.audienceoutlookmonitor.com/league-of-american-orchestras. The League will work with WolfBrown to examine audience attitudes about inclusion, diversity, equity, and access in the coming months.

Recent studies from the League’s data partnerships are available at the League’s COVID-19 Data Partnerships webpages.